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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000447

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR DRL

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SUBJECT: THE RESILIENT CHRISTIANS OF TAMANRASSET

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Some 2000 kilometers south of Algiers in the heart of the Sahara, a small group of Catholics continue to hold small, discreet services, despite the restrictions local officials have placed on their activities. Each week, 20-30 Christians attend services in a tiny sand and mud church in downtown Tamanrasset. Most worshippers are drawn from the town's large sub-Saharan African population, which includes migrants both legal and illegal. When the Catholics -- the modern heirs of the "Peres Blancs" of Algerian colonial history -- opened a small school to offer remedial education to the children of Tamanrasset in 2007, the government initially tolerated it but never granted official permission. The school was shut a year ago, and one teacher was ordered to leave Algeria on March 24 of this year. The Catholics in Tamanrasset have their activities severely constrained: no visible activity is permitted, no education beyond French language instruction is allowed, the delivery of religious magazines from France has been interrupted, and regular administrative harassment is a regular occurrence. END SUMMARY.

THE FOLLOWERS OF CHARLES DE FOUCAULD

¶2. (C) Today's Peres Blancs ("White Fathers") of Tamanrasset are the followers of Charles de Foucauld, a French playboy-turned-ascetic who died in 1916. De Foucauld chose to live a monastic life in Tamanrasset and nearby Assekrem for years, although he died without having converted a single follower. His legend grew posthumously to include eventual beatification, and today a regular stream of Christian pilgrims visit Tamanrasset and Assekrem to retrace de Foucauld's spiritual journey in the Algerian desert. During the week of March 14-18 alone, 80 pilgrims passed through. Today, two priests live at the top of a rocky mountain at Assekrem, and 3 nuns, 3 priests and several volunteers hold mass and maintain a small compound near the site of de Foucauld's original house in downtown Tamanrasset. Each week, they hold mass in a tiny church within the compound for groups of 20-30 Africans drawn from a population that local officials claim includes more than 45 different African nationalities. The tiny community falls under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Ghardaia, over 1200 km to the north.

A TRADITION OF TOLERANCE NOW CHALLENGED

¶3. (C) During our March 25-26 visit to the region, Tamanrasset Mayor Ahmed Benmalek, a Tuareg Muslim, told us of the proud tradition of diversity and tolerance within the

vast Sahara region. He said that Tamanrasset had always been a crossroads, the "capital of the Sahara," and today "over 45 different African nationalities" were represented in the city, each maintaining its own traditions. As trade across the Sahara has grown and settlers have descended on Tamanrasset from northern Algeria and across the entire African continent, the population grew from less than 2000 at the time of Algerian independence in 1962 to over 130,000 today. "We are trying to hold on to our tolerant tradition," Benmalek said, pointing out that while the region had always been Muslim, it had never been particularly religious.

14. (C) A French diplomat who visited Tamanrasset recently told us that the region has become more religious and conservative in recent years, due to a significant influx of Algerians from the north. These new arrivals have followed major new development projects and government incentives to relocate away from crowded northern urban centers. Benmalek conceded privately that it was harder today to maintain Tamanrasset's open spirit, saying that the Christian community was welcome to practice, but had been asked to remain discreet.

RESTRICTIONS ON ACTIVITIES

15. (C) Sister Christiane has been living in the Catholic compound in Tamanrasset for just over a year, after spending 30 years doing missionary work in Mali. Alongside two other nuns, three priests and several volunteers, she maintains the compound and coordinates small-scale charitable activities.

ALGIERS 00000447 002 OF 002

Sister Christiane said they also provide informal medical care and have a good relationship with the local hospital, where they bring patients with more serious ailments. "We don't turn anyone away" who asks for assistance, she said, but added the government is very aware of their activities, and is watching. She told us on March 25 that she and her colleagues had been asked by local government and police officials to "keep their activities discreet" and not attract unnecessary attention. She said these instructions never came in writing, but in the form of personal police visits to the compound.

16. (C) When the Peres Blancs of Tamanrasset opened a small school near the compound in 2007, Sister Christiane said the government became nervous and the event was "very poorly received." The school was intended to offer remedial education to students with special needs, as well as very limited French language education - no religious education whatsoever. It never received official permission to operate, according to the French diplomat, since "the government is afraid of proselytizing," as Sister Christiane told us. The local authorities ordered the school closed in 2008 and most of the volunteers connected to the project left Algeria, although one volunteer continued to give free courses on her own. She was retired and undeclared to the authorities, a status the French diplomat said made the authorities draw the line. By letter from the Interior Ministry in early 2009, she was ordered to leave the country.

Several appeals followed, including by the French ambassador in person to the wali (governor) during a visit to Tamanrasset, but on March 24 a final letter arrived reinforcing the order to leave, with no reason given. The French diplomat told us the volunteer has since left the country, and that the government has ended delivery of religious magazines to the Peres Blancs.

COMMENT

17. (C) The Algerian authorities remain fearful of proselytism, particularly when it comes with a French accent that evokes colonial memories. Even so, the Catholic Church enjoys legal status in Algeria, the French diplomat noted,

putting it in a far better situation than other Christian groups, which are not even allowed to meet. In Tamanrasset, the Algerian strategy appears to be one of containment: the Catholics are accepted as long as they do not rock the boat. With the demise of the school, the Peres Blancs do not appear to have played by the local rules, as they never obtained permission. The episode seems to have reinforced Algerian paranoia, resulting in additional restrictions on their activities. Given the precarious security situation in neighboring Mali and Niger, along with the fact that the majority of Tamanrasset's Catholics arrived from the south, it seems clear the Algerian authorities are wary of any ethnic or religious variable that could change the status quo and destabilize the region.

PEARCE